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Interview with David Sanders, MVP: Founding Visionary and President of Culminis — Bringing IT Together

By [Stephen Ibaraki](#).
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Article Description

Stephen Ibaraki, I.S.P., offers an exclusive interview with Dave Sanders, Microsoft Most Valued Professional (MVP) recipient, founding visionary, and president of Culminis, the world's largest IT Pro organization. Culminis brings together and unites into an alliance IT Pros from user group organizations/societies/associations, corporations, and academia.

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Q: Dave, for the first time, IT Pros are "unified" worldwide in sharing value, and in demonstrating integrity, professionalism, and outreach in their workplace and communities. You and your remarkable team are the vision behind this historical mission. With your very heavy schedule, thank you for taking the time to share your considerable wisdom and insights in this interview.

A: It's my pleasure. Culminis has accomplished a great deal in a short period of time through the hard work of an extraordinary group of dedicated individuals. It is my honor and distinct pleasure to be their very humble leader.

Q: You founded a user group in Charlotte NC and inspired considerable sustained success. Please provide some history and how did this come about?

A: I was invited to participate in an advisory capacity as part of a group of IT Pros to provide Microsoft with guidance related to a "new" program they were considering called TechNet. All of the people involved from the IT community were leaders of IT Pro user groups around the US and Canada except me. I was asked by the folks at Microsoft to start a user group in Charlotte. I agreed to start one and decided that the main premise of the group would be making a difference in the community.

I showed up at the first TechNet briefing in Charlotte with a clipboard and a pen and signed up 78 people to my new user group. We held our first meeting 2 weeks later and 55 people showed up. One of my friends who was an author on network security gave the presentation. That was the smallest meeting we ever had. Since that time, we have never seen less than 100 people attend our monthly meetings. Now, six years later, we average just over 400 people at our meetings.

Q: Can you detail your key membership and community outreach programs and some success stories?

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A: From the first day, I was really serious about making a difference in the community, particularly with children if I could. I approached the public schools and found a real need for help there. Their technology was really poor with outmoded systems, little software and practically no technology instruction available for either the children or the teachers. I made an appeal to the members of my group as well as the companies in the community.

This has been an ongoing process and has become one of our hallmarks. Over the last five years, we have been instrumental in getting more than \$6,000,000.00 in hardware and software into the public schools, built over a dozen labs and changed the lives of over 500,000 children for the better. We also embraced the homeless and food banks. I ask my members to bring a donation item to each meeting for an extra chance to win a door prize. Last year, we had over 50 tons of food and clothing donated to the homeless and the food banks. Last Christmas, at one meeting, over 3 tons of toys were donated to the Marine Corps' "Toys for Tots" campaign.

Q: Which areas of your work are you most proud of and for what reasons?

A: Making a difference in the lives of children and those who are in need. No person ever stands as tall as when they stoop to help a child or someone in need. It is the essence of who we are and why we are here...to serve each other.

Q: How did this develop and lead into Culminis?

A: When I was asked to lead this organization, there were no employees and our initial budget was very small - the slate was pretty much open. I saw an opportunity to harness one of the greatest armies of hope ever conceived; IT Pros, by their nature want to help people. It is the essence of what they do. In my user group I saw the power of what one group could do; if I could bring that power online with 200,000,000, the results would be earth shaking.

Q: What is your vision for Culminis for 2005, 2006 and into the future, and how will you achieve it?

A: In order for us to achieve all of our goals and also make a profound difference, we have to first achieve a level of service and value to our member organizations and our sponsors. To accomplish this task, we have to produce solid, powerful programs and services that make the job of a user group leader easier, enhance the value of the membership experience in his/her organization, and create a solid value proposition for sponsors. Additionally, we have to open the communication channels for IT Pros to communicate with sponsors and close that loop of communication for all.

In 2004, we were very busy building an infrastructure to lay a foundation that we could use later on. In 2005, we leveraged that foundation and expanded programs and services into it. At the same time, we have launched globally. Our programs have matured much more in the US and our challenge is to leverage those programs and services globally as fast as possible. Our responsibilities, as well as our numbers, have grown greatly this year. We are nearing a half million members in over 2700 organizations and we are now moving into the academic space. This brings on even more challenges, but equally powerful opportunities, to make a difference in the lives of students and teachers. It is an exciting and challenging time for us. In 2006, we will continue to expand operations globally and to mature our programs in the other regions. We have a monumental task ahead of us but we are confident that we can make a positive difference.

Q: Describe and explain your initiatives in the different global geographic regions for this year. What are your time frames and anticipated outcomes?

A: Our goals are actually quite basic and while the numbers may change, the premise does not. We are here to raise the status of IT Pros, increase awareness, communication and education of IT technologies, and through our efforts and the efforts of our leaders, to make a positive difference in the communities in which we live and work.

Our time frames are always in flux mainly because nearly every one we ever set for ourselves, we achieve much more quickly than anticipated. However, we conduct all of our operations and programs with solid project management principles and strive to do everything with the highest possible quality.

To put things in perspective, we are simultaneously expanding into Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Canada. As I said, it is a monumental task and I don't think a lot of people really realize the enormity of what we have undertaken. Those that do are incredulous when I tell them I only have 25 people to do this. They are even more incredulous when I tell them that we built the initial 250,000 person organization with only 15. As I said, I am honored to lead an extraordinary group of very dedicated people.

Q: Who are your partners and how do they share in the Culminis vision?

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A: Microsoft and Intel are our most high level partners at present. Microsoft, in particular, has shown great foresight in understanding the vision of not only bringing the IT world together, but also in embracing the philosophy of making a difference. That is certainly true of the Microsoft people we work with in the US and Canada. However, it is not as well understood in the other regions. One of my primary tasks these days is getting the message out about really making a difference; and not in just meeting satisfaction levels and metrics. I think that eventually, all of Microsoft will understand and embrace what we are doing.

When you really think about it, if you don't dedicate your efforts to that approach, you will come off as just being interested in selling; not in the welfare of the IT Pros who support you every day or the communities in which they and you live. We have been blessed to have some very influential people within Microsoft embrace our vision for Culminis. I am very grateful to them for investing and believing in us.

Q: How do you and your Culminis team plan to make a difference in the workplace and community; and in academia, industry, and government?

A: First, we are building valuable programs and services like our SharePoint Portals, Free Web Hosting, Forums and Speaker's Bureaus around the world. Additionally, our document library has a large number of technology presentations and templates related to organizational functions and operations. All of our services are free to the organizations that are part of Culminis. You have to bring the audience under one roof to be able to reach them all effectively, to learn their needs so you can serve them better.

Once we mature our programs and services, expand our operations and reach globally, we are then in a position to determine the areas and levels of need and to create opportunities to address those needs. At the same time, I have been challenging the leaders to reach out to their communities through their user groups, to enable their members to make a difference in the lives of children, teachers and the less fortunate.

Q: User groups have encountered challenges over the past five years and yet the user group you founded in NC and Culminis has sustained phenomenal growth. What are your ten tips for User Group success?

Well, my group is an offline group which means we meet on a monthly basis. Some of these tips may not apply to online groups. The list is not in order of importance or any other kind of sequence. They are all of importance and have worked for me.

1. **Find a neutral venue for your meetings**

If you meet at a vendor site, it aligns you with that vendor and limits your appeal to potential members who may not care for that vendor. It also identifies you with their technology. While that's ok if you WANT to be defined as "X" group (X=a specific technology), I have found that an agnostic approach gives you a much broader base and more universal appeal. My group meets in a church and it is a great place to meet. The AV equipment is state of the art; it has High Speed WIFI and free parking!

2. **Start on time and end on time**

IT Pros are VERY busy people and their time is extremely valuable. You want them to feel that you are sensitive to that and running a tight ship on schedule conveys that message and respect to them.

3. **BELIEVE in and embrace the organization!**

Your members MUST see passion in your eyes. If you don't have it, it will show very quickly and your task will be a lot more difficult. If you are passionate about the group and its mission, it will come across in a hundred ways and your members will become infected by your passion and enthusiasm.

4. **Seek out solid committed individuals to help**

If you have followed number 3, they will emerge to you. These people are the lifeblood of your organization. IT IS NOT ABOUT YOU. Rather, it is how you can take these motivated people and raise them up. If you adopt this approach, you will always have great people there to help and to get things done.

5. **Get involved in COMMUNITY OUTREACH early on**

You can start by asking members to bring a canned food item or a piece of clothing to donate to those less fortunate. Find ways to get involved with schools, homeless shelters, food banks and senior centers, to positively affect lives in your community. This point more than any other will help grow and sustain your organization most effectively. People crave to make a difference and to be part of an organization that does. Not only will your numbers grow substantially in a relatively short period, sponsors will flock to you and the community will embrace your organization wholeheartedly

6. **Seek out leaders to join you**

Your organization will benefit greatly from the experience and wisdom of these individuals. You will also grow as a leader from the association. There is an old saying, "never be afraid to employ people smarter than you are". I can tell you from first hand experience that this tactic can pay off for you in ways you never dreamed of.

7. **It's not about you**

It's not about you. It's not about you. It's not about you.

8. **Always treat your members with respect**

As I mentioned earlier, set a schedule and keep to it. This is just one way of showing respect. Other ways include soliciting their input and thanking them for it. Follow-up on the input and use it if appropriate. If not, let them know why, but always make sure they know that they are important to you and the group.

9. **Mentor**

Work with the young leaders in the organization. Help them to grow and to flourish as leaders and identify the individuals who can lead after you have gone. That is one of your primary responsibilities.

10. **Lead by example**

Give back. You must not expect others to do things that you cannot or would not do yourself. Become involved in the programs and services that you are asking others to participate in. Be the one in the lead. That is your job, remember?

Q: What is the value proposition for joining the:

a. Culminis Alliance

We have a host of services that we have created for Alliance organizations. There are 31 right now and I invite leaders to visit the Culminis website (www.Culminis.com) to review them. Beyond that, we are a vehicle to provide feedback to our sponsors and to have the voices of our leaders heard in a substantive way.

b. Culminis Elite

Our ELITE program is a relatively new program that we are still in the process of rolling out. In a nutshell, it allows companies with significant IT Pro populations to create their own, "user group" and to provide many of the same services and programs that we provide to the Alliance Members.

c. Culminis Academics

Like the ELITE program, we are early in the development process. We are exploring ways for IT Pros to get started early in their learning experience and to build their skill sets upon a rich foundation of learning materials and opportunities. Additionally, we hope to create portals for integration into the workplace as well as provide a conduit to the community through integration with the Alliance program.

Q: Dave, can you comment on what it is to be an IT Professional?

A: For a long time now, I have witnessed a continual decline of the status of the IT Pro through the media. They have been called nerds and geeks in just about every corner of the globe. It further distresses me that IT Pros often are satisfied with such titles.

I believe that IT Pros deserve the same level of respect as other disciplines. They are high quality professionals who work diligently to deliver quality work and are continually studying and learning, on a daily basis, to keep up with dramatically changing technologies.

As a corporate CEO, if you come to me as a geek costing me X dollars an hour, I look at you as a liability. I want you out of my facility as soon as I can get you out because you ARE a liability to me. You are **costing** me money.

However, if you come to me as a Technology Professional offering solutions to business process issues involving IT, you become an ASSET to me. You are **making** me money. I want you as part of my organization and your value to me goes up tremendously.

I have been encouraging all IT Pros to see themselves as Solution Architects. Ron Gandiza of my staff came up with the term and the idea and I believe it is a solid and

profound one. Solution Architects are professionals who are not only proficient in the technology, but professional in the understanding of the business practices and premises driving the technology. Being a certified technology professional is great. It provides you with an opportunity to be of value to a business for fixing the ills of networks, servers and pc's. However, if you combine that ability with intrinsic business knowledge and understanding, you increase your value exponentially.

Q: What ten attributes make for a successful IT Pro?

1. Openness
2. Humility
3. Persistence
4. Loving
5. Passion
6. Confidence
7. Forgiving
8. Believe
9. Trustful
10. Qualified

I'll discuss all of these later.

Q: How does Culminis support, enhance and elevate the status of the IT Pro in the workplace and in their communities?

A: First we challenge them to make a difference, by identifying and becoming involved in community outreach opportunities. We acknowledge those who step up and make a difference, with public acknowledgements such as articles publication, recognition letters and certificates and finally with Thank You programs. They become "IT Heroes". We also encourage them to move from "Geek" status (in how they view themselves) to IT Professionals or Solution Architects. They do this by changing the way they see themselves first and then expanding their knowledge and abilities to include understanding and mastery of business practices (as noted earlier).

Q: Describe your responsibilities: day-to-day, tactically, and strategically.

A: My job is to provide a solid management foundation for those who do the real work of Culminis to stand upon. My main job, every day, is to find every possible opportunity to elevate my staff. I work hard to remove roadblocks and make their jobs easier.

Every day is different. I face a thousand challenges and decisions every day. Luckily, I am blessed with the finest group of individuals I have ever had the honor to serve, my staff and the IT Pros we represent. I work for EVERONE.

Q: Who are your key team members and what can you share about them?

A: All of my staff are key to me. Each of them are unique and wonderful in a myriad of ways. Their stories are all tremendously inspiring and humbling. My tremendous respect for each of them precludes me from sharing personal anecdotes without their permission, but I can tell you that I am amazed daily by their intelligence, professionalism and love for what they do. Each of them has sacrificed a lot to come to Culminis. All have given up much more lucrative positions to join me. As you are aware, we are a sponsored, non-profit organization. We can't offer the kinds of compensation packages the big companies can. In spite of that, each of these wonderful people has embraced the vision of changing the world by making a difference in lives and they work TREMENDOUSLY hard to make that dream a reality. I am very humbled in their presence.

Q: You have a most remarkable history. What ten lessons can you share with others and how did these lessons come about?

A: Thank you but I don't regard myself as remarkable at all, just blessed. Hmmm, ten lessons. Rather than relate personal stuff about me, allow me to offer some advice based on a life of considerable trial and error (mostly error) in which I have been supremely fortunate to have observed and been taught by some great people and how they lived their lives.

1. **Be open**
Open your mind and your heart to those around you. One of the greatest challenges that we have in life is to overcome our own prejudices. I am not just speaking of racial or age or other more obvious ones, necessarily. Those are great detractors of open thinking, growth and communication and are hugely important, but I am also speaking of how we view ourselves. Open your mind to ideas. Open your heart to love and compassion. Allow yourself to be filled with the great goodness that these positive emotions can bring. By doing so, you give yourself a huge boost in your ability to learn and grow. Martin Luther King had the extraordinary ability to see the world not as it was, but as it could be. His life has always served as a shining example to me of

how to be open to everyone and everything around you to expand your mind and achieve your dreams.

2. **Be humble**

This one is tough. In a world where we are constantly told to achieve, to market ourselves and to claw the way to the top, this idea seems to run contrary to the "natural" order. However, I can tell you that you will achieve everything in life if you can help enough other people get what they want and not care who gets the credit. It is not about you. You are not here to have dominion over others, to rule anyone or wield power. You are here to serve. This was Einstein's answer to the question of "Why are we here? He was a great deal more intelligent than I am..."

3. **Persistence**

Nothing is as powerful as a person who never gives up. You can and will achieve your dreams if you never let them go. Look at Lance Armstrong. In spite of overwhelming odds that he would even survive, he kept up his drive to achieve his dream and won the Tour de France 7 times.

4. **Loving**

This is the most important of all. In all of your dealings with your family, your friends and your peers, keep an open and loving heart. Not only is it a good thing to do, it sets the tone for open and honest communications. It raises your visibility in the eyes of those around you and increases their respect for you immeasurably. This is not something that you can fake. Either you embrace it or you don't. If you try to fake it, it will be seen immediately. Change your heart first and you can then change your life.

Another extraordinary sidebar to conducting yourself from this premise is that it is VERY hard to be depressed. You begin to see the good in everyone around you. Andrew Carnegie at one time had more millionaires working for him than any one in the world. When asked why that was the case, he said, "I'm a gold miner". Puzzled, the interviewer said, "You made your fortune in oil. How can you call yourself a gold miner?" Mr. Carnegie replied, "When you work with people, it is a lot like mining for gold. You do not look for the dirt. You look for the gold." There is gold in every one of us. If we are open to looking for it, we will find it. However, you can not see it without a loving heart.

5. **Passion**

This is a very important trait for a leader. I discussed it earlier but it is worth revisiting. Passion is one of the most positively contagious conditions a human can experience. It is the seed that grows great ideas and delivers on wonderful promises. As Henri Frederic Amiel said, "Without passion man is a mere latent force and possibility, like the flint which awaits the shock of the iron before it can give forth its spark."

6. **Confidence**

We all have up and down days. It is really tough to be up all of the time. I have found that on those days that it is hardest, I benefit from seeing myself at my best. Full of energy and passion, loving what I do and those around me. This image always helps me to get off my butt and get things moving in a positive and productive way. I had a wonderful teacher early in life named Lawton Addington who once said to me, "Success is made in cans and Failure is made in can'ts". That simple saying stayed with me and inspires me even today, after all these years.

7. **Forgiveness**

First, **Forgive Yourself**. ALL of us do things that we regret, are ashamed of or just embarrassed about. While they may not seem in retrospect to be that serious, each of us carries around that baggage day to day. That weight can pull you down, reduce your effectiveness, create fears and limit your ability to succeed and to inspire others. Consequently, the first thing you have to do is to sit down with yourself and have a frank discussion about who you are, where you are and how you got there. You are who you are through the experiences that you have been through. That includes the mistakes. Drop the baggage! Forgive yourself and start every day with a clean slate. In fact, practice this on an hourly basis if you have to. You will find that a remarkable thing will start to happen. You will find yourself making fewer and fewer mistakes as your confidence grows and you will begin to achieve things you never dreamed you could achieve. John Steinbeck said, "It is the nature of man to rise to greatness if greatness is expected of him." You have to expect it of yourself before others will look to you for it.

Second, **Forgive Others**. This is another tough one. It is easy to be angry and to hold grudges. Well, I want to challenge you to take a tougher and higher road. Forgive EVERYONE who has ever wronged you...and do it on a continuing basis. Yes it is tough, but I can tell you from personal experience that if you can do this, it will elevate you in ways you can't begin to imagine.

In January of this year, I was sitting at a table in Prague. At the table with me

were some of my fellow Microsoft MVPs. On my right were two individuals and on my left were two more. The individuals on my left were Arab and Israeli, respectively. On my right were individuals from Russia and the Czech Republic, respectively. The very fact that we were all together at one table was remarkable enough but here at this table were individuals who are regarded as mortal enemies. However, there was no animosity between any of us. All of us were laughing and sharing information, enjoying each other's company and deepening friendships. Much of the anger and acrimony that we see in the media is fostered by individuals who have lost the ability to forgive. That is a travesty. Without forgiveness, there is no hope for mankind.

8. **Believe**

First, in yourself. There is no limit to accomplishment if you truly believe that you can accomplish something. There are countless examples in the history of the human condition where individuals have overcome unbelievable odds and succeeded in the face of experts who said it could not be done.

Second, in the value of others. Every person is valuable. As you go through life, there are a multitude of individuals who support you, interface with you and serve you on a regular basis. Each of them from your significant other to the waiter/waitress who served you lunch today are valuable, caring and intelligent people who have value. Believe in the value of others and it will serve you well. Believe in a higher purpose for your life. We are all here to achieve that purpose and it is your job to seek it out. Sometimes it will find you but trust me, it is there. You are a unique individual of great value here to achieve great things. These are defined by your opportunity and circumstance. Seize the opportunity every day and make the most of it.

9. **Trust**

Another tough one. It is our nature to be suspicious and distrustful. This is largely because we have allowed others to run our lives. That statement may surprise you. You say, "I run my own life!" I say that every time you lose your temper, distrust another person or allow yourself to hate someone because of the color of their skin, their political affiliation, place of birth or religious conviction (or lack of); you have surrendered control to someone else. You have given over control of yourself to those you malign, hate, suspect etc. Only YOU can control how you feel, think and act. Take responsibility for your own actions, your thoughts and your life. You cannot be a leader of others if you do not have control of yourself.

10. **Qualified**

As I discussed earlier, it is great to be certified on a technology. It shows that you have done the work and persisted to be the best you can be. I encourage IT Pros to also learn business processes and keep their technology skills current and sharp. This also includes sharing your expertise and mentoring others to raise the quality of ALL IT Pros. You elevate yourself when you lift up others.

Q: What key events in your life were defining moments and why?

A: The day I became a Christian because it gave purpose and value to my life in ways I never dreamed of and is still doing so after almost 40 years.

The birth of my children because it filled me with the awesome responsibility I now hold in my hands. Those events created a humble spirit of service within me that had been missing to that point.

The day that I lost everything that I owned in a business deal and had to start my professional life over at age 40. That humbling experience taught me the value of humility, love and forgiveness. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me in a lot of ways.

The day that I married my wife who has been my best friend and greatest supporter (NOT an easy task).

The day I escaped death on a motorcycle and the two+ year recovery period. Because, again, more lessons in humility, forgiveness and faith.

Q: Dave, just one of your major strengths is strong leadership. This comes across repeatedly when speaking with others. How would you define leadership, what are the top ten attributes of good leadership and how can they be utilized?

On this one, I don't need ten. Only one attribute is most important for a leader. If you master this one, you have to have mastered all of the others.

Give yourself away.

To do this, you have to divest yourself of that huge ego that you have been cultivating

all of these years. It is not about you. It is about how you can lead others to achieve more than they knew they could achieve. It is about leading people to self realization and awareness. It is about changing lives in a positive and powerful way. It is about making a difference. To do these things, you must master all of the other things I have discussed and live your life in a new and powerful way.

Live for others, not for yourself.

Character has been defined as what you do when no one is looking. In large part that is true. It is saying that who you are in secret is who you really are. I am challenging the leaders in the world to be who they really are no matter where they are. To do that, you must divest yourself of the negative baggage and poor habits you have been building and carrying around all of your life.

The good news is that YOU CAN DO IT and when you do, the rewards will be tremendous for you and those you lead.

Q: What are the five biggest challenges and how will they be resolved?

A: Overcoming suspicion has been a major one. We are truly about trying to make a positive difference in the world and we have been attacked many times, sometime very aggressively. The only thing we can do is to continue to work as hard as we can to help everywhere we can. One of the nicest things that was ever said to me by a manager at Microsoft was, "Dave, I have met with you on multiple occasions, heard you speak and listened closely to your words. In every case, I am convinced that all you want to do is the right thing".

She is correct.

Q: Choose five topics of your choosing and providing commentary.

A: I really only have one other topic that I would like to mention if you don't mind.

I would like to say something about how Culminis got started.

A couple of years ago, Microsoft rounded up the leaders of a dozen groups in the US and Canada to embark on an experiment to develop a way to reach out to the IT Pro community. I was one of those chosen to participate.

We all met in Redmond and I was struck by the level of quality and character of the people I was honored to be a part of. These individuals were the leaders that Microsoft had brought together to try out the experiment on. Every one of them were high quality professionals and I was humbled and honored to be part of them. They are listed on our website and honored as the people who are responsible for Culminis coming in to being. As we have grown and moved out in to other regions, I have used the model of this first "Council" to create like bodies in each of the regions. We have been fortunate to find very similar individuals in the regions around the world and have made them advisors, as well. The role models of the original Culminis board has been very beneficial to our success and continued growth. I want to thank those original members of the IT Pro Council for their leadership, support and advice. They have been invaluable.

Q: If you were doing this interview, what three questions would you ask and what would your answers be?

A: I can't think of anything that has been missed. You have done an outstanding job with your questions.

Q: Dave, you are making history with Culminis. We thank you for taking the time to do this interview and sharing your deeply considered insights, valued wisdom, substantial history and considerable experience with our audience

A: I am deeply honored to have this opportunity to have the Culminis message broadcast and humbled by the awesome opportunity and responsibility we have before us. I greatly appreciate your time and effort and I thank everyone reading this for their time and attention. It is my hope that something that I or someone at Culminis has said or done will positively change someone's life and inspire them to reach out and change other lives.

Let's make a difference.

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